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ABSTRACT

The Rap Room, as described in this report, is a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week, drop-in center for troubled students. Peer rather than professional help is available to students worried about personal, academic or financial problems. Three major intentions are discussed: (1) to give students an alternative to professional counseling; (2) to offer training to students who wish to help others; and (3) to make contact with the University Counseling Center available 24 hours a day. The recruitment, training, and functions of volunteers are described. Widespread use has been made of the Rap Room, and its services greatly expanded to meet the need system of the student culture. Problems which remain center around volunteers who miss shifts or give advice when they should be listening. In general, the volunteers are pleased with the work which has been done. (TL)

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THE RAP ROOM - A UNIVERSITY PEER COUNSELLING CENTRE

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1969, the Rap Room was set up as a 24-hour 7-day a week drop-in centre for troubled students. It followed from a suggestion by a student-staff committee to involve peers as face-to-face counsellors. The aim is to provide a place where students worried about personal, academic, or financial problems can seek help from a peer rather than a professional.

Anonymity is guaranteed as students seeking assistance need not give names nor fill out forms. Also, unlike some drop-in centres, neither refreshments nor entertainment are offered to emphasize that the Room is for students with specific problems.

The room used is small and is comfortably furnished with carpets, soft chairs, etc., and is located in the Campus Centre, a lounge building for students and off-campus guests and often drifters.

Intentions: The foremost intention of the Rap Room is to give students an alternative to professional counselling. It is in the 14 to 20 year group that peer influence is at its height. Many students are fearful or distrustful of the professional and may choose to go without the help they need. The Rap Room volunteers are trained to listen in an empathic, friendly way. The large number of students using the Rap Room points out the beneficial effects positive peer response and encouragement can produce.

A second intention of the Rap Room is to offer training to students who wish to help others and feel they have the capacity to do so. The students who serve as volunteers do not necessarily intend to make counselling per se a career.

A third intention of the Rap Room is to make contact with the University Counselling Centre available 24 hours a day when needed.

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Professional counsellors back up Rap Roomers by being on call via a Bell telephone Bell-boy at nights and on weekends.

VOLUNTEERS

Recruitment: In September and again in January, advertisements are placed in the student newspaper and posters are displayed around campus calling for interested people to come to an organizational supper meeting. This usually brings a response from 40 to 75 people. Some faculty or staff respond but more than 95% are students. The volunteers come mainly from Arts and Mathematics and in great proportion from that group of students who already frequent the Campus Centre. Screening of candidates for suitability is mainly through self-selection. There are no tests known to the author that would serve as effective predictors of who would develop into a good volunteer. Weeding out takes place as the Rap Room functions. Volunteers missing shifts without good reason are dropped from the roster and complaints received about volunteers are carefully followed up. Some volunteers disqualify themselves during training sessions saying they do not think they could handle people well enough.

Training: Training sessions are held twice weekly for two weeks. Speakers are invited to talk about relevant topics such as drugs, sexual disorders, and law. Discussions follow led by Counselling Centre members to tease out how problems could be approached. Role-play is becoming a more important part of training. It lets the volunteer get the feel of what he or she will face when a troubled student comes for help. After the initial training sessions are over, supper meetings are held every three weeks to discuss volunteers' experiences and to work out any problems that have come up. Speakers are also invited to these meetings to continue the training and informing process.

Function of the volunteer: The volunteer conceives of him- or herself as an interested fellow student, not a counsellor or psychologist or social worker in training. This is in keeping with the intention that the Rap Room is an alternative to professional counselling.

The volunteer aims to listen in an empathic way, remaining interested but also more objective about the person's problem than a friend might be. Friends can be too quick to offer advice or reassurance when a person really needs to talk something out. Volunteers avoid giving advice, trying instead to guide students to their own answers. Unlike the average professional, however, the volunteers can go further in extending personal friendship to the student, such as inviting him to a party if he is lonely or introducing him to others.

Shifts are three to four hours in duration and students are encouraged to take the same shifts each week. This cuts down on scheduling problems and missed shifts due to forgetfulness.

The volunteer is reasonably well informed from the training sessions about drug reactions, talking down trips, birth control, etc. Also on hand is a book containing information about local agencies and the type of service they provide. If a volunteer is still uncertain what to do, he or she can call the Counsellor on call.

The only notes kept by the volunteer go into a "log" book. No names are used. Only the type of instance the volunteer handled is recorded. For example, an entry might read, "Girl came in to talk about boy friend troubles. Seemed to feel better after half-hour of rapping." Perusal of the book allows statistics to be kept.

EVALUATION

Table 1 shows the number of people seen per month from October to the end of March and the reason they came.

Insert Table 1 about here

The fact that 452 students visited the Rap Room over a six month period indicates that it was successful in a numerical sense. That about 200 of the 452 came for causes listed as miscellaneous needs immediate comment.

Cases falling into this category include persons dropping by to ask where another campus building is located as well as those who come in, sit down, and just talk for a half hour without ever naming a problem. The latter seem to want somebody to talk to about things that interest them. These chats may be very valid business. Even the requests for information about buildings may represent a person's initial trying out of the Room, prior to a more serious visit.

The categories in Table 1 cover a wide spectrum of human problems. Most people came to talk over the "typical" types of problems, drug cases representing only about 10% of cases.

Table 2 indicates that about 50% of business occurs between 9:30 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. This occurs mainly on weekdays; the only exceptions being Friday and Saturday evenings from 9 p.m. on until about 2 a.m. Thirty percent come between 9:30 a.m. and 8:30 p.m. when the Counselling Centre is open. This might indicate that students are picking the Rap Room as an alternative to professional counselling.

Insert Table 2 about here

The Rap Room, situated as it is in a student round-the-clock building, has become atuned to much of the student culture and need system that had not been evident to the Counselling Centre. Shortly after the Room opened, it was pressed for birth control information and requests for abortion referrals. Drug problems came to light as drug cases came in and volunteers shared their knowledge of the drug culture. When the Rap Room sought to get emergency medical treatment for drug cases that could not be talked down and required medication, it found that night emergency services both on campus and in the city had great gaps in them. As a result of these observations, Counselling and the Rap Room began to accumulate lists of doctors who would prescribe birth control pills for single girls and obtained information about the availability of abortion in nearby centres.

One group of 4 Rap Roomers split off in March 1970 and set up the Student Birth Control Centre taking over the last two functions exclusively. About this same time, the Rap Room sponsored a campus panel on birth control and abortion featuring two doctors and a lawyer from London, Ontario where freer abortion policy had been pioneered at Victoria Hospital. About 500 people from campus and city health agencies attended.

After two years of operation, the volunteers feel generally pleased with the work the Room has done. The problems that remain centre around volunteers who miss shifts or give advice when they should listen. Also, the question of how to make the Room available to a wider group of students, ones who do not normally frequent the Campus Centre, arises frequently. Perhaps a second Rap Room located in another part of the campus is needed. It is usually the wrestling with problems such as these that has led to the next step in the development of the Rap Room.

TABLE 1

RAP ROOM STATISTICS - 1970-71.

CASES	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	
Miscellaneous	25	26	9	18	57	60	
Information							
Course	3	5		16	3	2	
Housing		2	2				
Financial	1						
Job		2		1	1	4	
General	8	5	2	12	4	3	
Alcoholics Anonymous (referral)		1					
Addiction Research Foundation							
Childrens Aid Society							
Personal							
Study	2	1	2			1	
Quitting	3						
Lonely	3	4	1	1	2	2	
Depressed	3	1		2	1	1	
Upset	4	11	1	3	2	2	
Family	2	8		2	2	5	
Legal	7			2			
Sex							
Birth Control	6	9	4	6	5	5	
V.D.	4	1			4	2	
Hang-ups	2	3					
Drunks	2				2		
Drugs							
Talk	5	3	1	4	4	5	
Reaction	5	2	4	4	5	4	
TOTALS	85	82	26	71	92	96	452

TABLE 2

TOTAL CASES (BY SHIFT)

SHIFT	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	
9 - 12:30	8	11	2	13	8	9	
12:30 - 3	19	14	4	19	15	17	
3 - 7	15	12	6	16	17	15	
7 - 10	19	19	6	10	15	18	
10 - 2	20	14	6	11	24	22	
2 - 9	2	12	2	3	13	15	
TOTAL	85	82	26	71	92	96	
Phone Calls	15	25	4		2	6	